

# BACKGROUND ESSAY

## THEY WILL SHOOT YOU LIKE A DOG

Joseph Stalin (1879-1953) succeeded Vladimir Lenin as the leader of the Soviet Union. He ruled the Soviet Union with an iron fist for nearly thirty years. Executions, purges, imprisonment, famine, forced relocation, and other methods helped Stalin to stay in power. No government in history, with the exception of Communist China, caused the death of so many of its citizens.

"Death solves all problems," said Stalin. "No man, no problem." Stalin was an efficient problem-solver. Experts estimate that tens of millions people died as a result of his actions in Ukraine; the trials and executions of 1936-1938; and the Gulag, a system of forced labor camps.

Stalin believed in the abolition of private property. Throughout the Soviet Union, he seized agricultural land owned by individuals. Then, he turned these properties into collective [group] farms. Stalin believed that collectivization would improve the nation's overall productivity.

This policy was widely opposed throughout the Soviet Union. Ukraine was a rich agricultural part of the Soviet Union. Many resisted Stalin's collectivization. In retaliation, Stalin increased the quota [required amount] of grain to be produced by 44%. Individuals could only receive grain after the government quota had been met. Ukrainians would have to work harder but would receive less for their efforts. Most of their crops would be sent elsewhere.

Stalin feared Ukrainian opposition both to himself and his policies. He fully supported actions leading to genocide [the elimination of a race or ethnic group.] From 1932-1933, millions of Ukrainians died as a result of the famine Stalin created. Entire communities starved to death. Individuals were imprisoned or executed for taking even a handful of grain from the government warehouses. Soviet officials stopped starving people from travelling to areas where food was available.

Some Ukrainian and other opposition leaders were sent to the Gulag. This was a system of forced labor camps throughout Russia. Many of them were located in Siberia. There, the harsh climate and the sadistic treatment of the prisoners resulted in millions of deaths. Political dissidents as well as common criminals made up the work force. They built railroads, dams, and hydroelectric plants. They dug for coal, gold, and salt. A prisoner remembered that the guards would "shoot them like dogs" if they challenged their captors.

In 1931, Stalin was asked how long he was going to go on killing people. "As long as necessary," he responded. In the mid 1930s, Stalin began a national campaign to eliminate all opposition to his policies. People could not speak out against his policies for fear of arrest and death. They were arrested and sent to the Gulag.

The years from 1936-1938 are known as the